

'When I joined the Pony Club it was just two boys and 48 girls'

Pepsi Kohler on being delightfully outnumbered by girls in the Pony Club, a leg-up from a royal and the H&H advert that changed his life

I STARTED riding in 1969 at an equestrian centre in Devon. I helped on Saturdays in return for a lesson. We did all sorts of jobs, but I can't remember poo-picking – I don't think we did it in those days. We'd ride the horses from the field bareback, then hop off just before we got to the yard so we didn't get caught.

When I joined the Pony Club it was just me, one other boy and 48 girls. I had my first kiss at Pony Club camp. I was too old for mounted games but got the bug for eventing. I sucked a lemon to do the dressage, but I liked jumping and going fast so I got my buzz sitting in that 10-minute box.

At 16, I had the opportunity to spend a few weeks on Olympic eventer Bertie Hill's yard. It was one of the greatest things I've done in my life. I rode so many horses; my feet never touched the ground. I was in heaven but after two weeks I fell off in a ditch, broke both my thumbs and had to go home.

I went back the following year and stayed longer and sounder. It was the first time I got taken out to the pub. We were still up at 6am for morning stables.

My first one-day event was at Powderham Castle. Princess Anne was parked next to us and when I couldn't get my horse off the lorry, she came and helped. She also gave me a leg-up – and while I did get round the course, that was my highlight.

The dressage arenas were by the main Paddington to Plymouth train line. In the

middle of my test a train went past, and my horse did a double somersault. I can't remember what my score was, but it wasn't good.

My mum stayed to watch Princess Anne and said she was convinced that there were two detectives stopping the trains while she did her test. Many years later, I mentioned that to the princess and she laughed.

LONDON BECKONS

I HAD a farrier friend and we fancied ourselves as horse dealers. We'd go to Exeter horse sales and buy a couple at a time. He'd sort their feet out; I'd ride them, and we'd take them back to the sales and make a profit. One day we decided we'd go to Tattersalls. The first horse was in foal to Mill Reef and sold for £50,000! Needless to say, we didn't buy a thing.

I got my AI at Haytor Vale Riding School. They had a 100% pass rate and you had to do a whole year there before you sat your exams. There were other places where they rushed you through the qualifications, but it might mean you'd never actually clipped a horse.

I was teaching at a riding school in Dorset when an advert in the *Horse & Hound* caught my eye. I can't remember the exact words but the ones that grabbed me were "horses", "competing" and "London". As a young lad from the West Country I thought, "I'll have a bit of that!" It was a five-day trial for the King's Troop.



ABOUT PEPSI...

PEPSI KOHLER, 63, lives with his wife Helen in Suffolk. He qualified as an AI in Devon before joining the King's Troop and then transferring to the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. He competed in eventing and showjumping. When he left the Army, he taught the local branch of the Pony Club and riding club before re-establishing the equestrian centre at Bridgwater College. He now stewards at Tattersalls.

I was in the King's Troop for just over 10 years. I remember my first musical drive at Doncaster in 1981. It was real "hairs on the back of your neck" stuff. The weather was horrendous and when we finished all the uniforms had to go off for cleaning and the fire brigade had to hose off the guns.

I did my first Royal Tournament that year. There were 15,000 people in Earl's Court but after a bit you don't notice the crowds as you're concentrating on the job.

My sergeant encouraged us to compete, and I had a brilliant little horse called Tosca whom I jumped up to Foxhunter. I tried to event her, but we didn't get far with the dressage – one of the comments was that her front legs went faster than a piston.

Then I got a young horse called Tommy XXVIII whom I evented to intermediate. I had to leave him behind when I was promoted to a different subsection of the King's Troop as each section had a different colour horse, from light bay to black.

The highlight of my military career was

being an instructor at the Army School of Equitation in Melton Mowbray. I had many roles there, including producing horses for ceremonial duties and competitions, but the most enjoyable was teaching potential military riding instructors. It allowed me to advise, encourage and train the next generation.

IMPARTING KNOWLEDGE

AFTER an incredible 22 years, I left the Army and moved back to the West Country with my wife, Helen, and two sons. I wanted to carry on teaching so ended up working with the West Somerset branch of the Pony Club and some local riding clubs.

Teaching in the military is quite easy because if they don't do what you say, you lock them up. It was a bit different teaching in the outside world! I can go into full sergeant major mode at the drop of a hat, so I had to bite my tongue sometimes.

I ended up running the equestrian centre at Bridgwater College in Somerset, where I worked with a wonderful woman called Jane McGuinness, sadly no longer with us. Her favourite saying when teaching was, "Come on girls, boobs to the rafters!" to make people sit up. I couldn't get away with saying that of course.

When I retired from the college, Helen and I moved to Suffolk. I keep my hand in with horses by stewarding at Tattersalls sales. The other day a yearling sold for £4.4m. It's funny to think back to all those years ago when my farrier friend and I went there thinking we were big-time West Country horse dealers. **H&H**

● *As told to Catherine Welton*

My equestrian mantras

IN the Army, after teaching a lesson, we'd always discuss it with the other instructors. We'd share good practice and ask advice if we were struggling. I missed that when I was teaching outside the Army. I think freelance instructors should be more open with each other.

The most important piece of advice I was given was from Captain Wooff. He said to take some knowledge from everyone you meet but also stay true to yourself. I've

tried to stick to that in my career. Mrs Wooff, his wife, said that the best way to judge a yard is by the state of its muck heap and water buckets!

Bertie Hill used to say you're ready to tackle the cross-country course when you've got that "hospital taste" in your mouth. It means your blood's up – and the day you don't have that feeling is the day you should stop, because you're too blasé, which is dangerous on a cross-country course.

Illustration by Emma Earnshaw

